

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN
LAMBETH CHAPEL,
AT THE
CONSECRATION

OF THE
RIGHT REVEREND FATHER IN GOD
S A M U E L
LORD BISHOP OF ST. DAVID'S,
ON WHITSUNDAY, MAY 11, 1788.

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CONSECRATION SERMON.

TITUS, CHAP. I. VER. 9.

HOLDING FAST THE FAITHFUL WORD, AS HE HATH BEEN
TAUGHT, THAT HE MAY BE ABLE, BY SOUND DOCTRINE,
BOTH TO EXHORT, AND TO CONVINC THE GAINSAYERS.

THE factions and divisions of the Church of Corinth, which the person to whom this epistle is addressed was, by its author, commissioned to settle and compose, must have afforded him many experimental proofs of the utility of the qualifications prescribed in the text. In the effectual accomplishment of the im-

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portant object of his mission, he was undoubtedly called upon to exert frequently such powers as must have derived their whole efficacy from these endowments. During his attendance of several years on the great apostle of the Gentiles, and in the various places to which he travelled, he must have beheld their good effects very remarkably exemplified. The character of the Cretans, over whom he afterwards presided in the highest seat of ecclesiastical authority, was of such a sort as must have demanded the constant exercise of such qualifications, both from himself and from those, *whom he ordained elders in every city*; and it may indeed be safely asserted, that no period can be fixed upon in ecclesiastical history, no place can be pointed out where a Christian church hath been planted, in which they have not been found indispensable.

While persecutions raged with repeated violence; while heresies sprang up, and for a time flourished in innumerable forms; it was highly expedient, that those

who were called to preside over the flock of Christ should hold fast *the faithful, the certain word worthy of belief, according to doctrine, that they might be able to exhort or to comfort** *those who were under every sort of affliction*, as the Alexandrine manuscript hath it; and also to convince and to rebuke† *the gainsayers*. In succeeding centuries, when these vexations gave place to others; whether the obstinacy of ignorance or the arrogance of human wisdom opposed pure religion; whether superstition involved the perfections of it in darkness, or enthusiasm deluded men from it by dazzling and false lights, the same qualifications were still required, and frequently called forth into action.

Since the enemies of Christianity have changed the mode of their attacks, and have endeavoured insidiously to undermine the fabric, that hath withstood every effort

* Τὰς ἐν πάσῃ θλίψει. Alex.

† See the word ἔλεγχειν in this sense joined with the adverb ἀποτόμως, Tit. i. ver. 13.

of open force; equal abilities, profound penetration, unremitting vigilance and perseverance, daily become more and more requisite in all, who are bound *to comfort the faithful under afflictions*, and protect them from the dangers that threaten them from the artifices of numberless adversaries.

The progress of human knowledge, though in itself highly beneficial and improving to society, and ultimately tending to the increase of God's glory upon earth, an effect far superior to its immediate objects, is by no means exempt from those temporary inconveniences, that always arise from man's misapprehension of his own talents, and his abuse of the chief favors of Providence. A firm and most important step was taken, in the investigation of natural causes and effects, when, instead of systems created entirely by conjecture, accurate and repeated experiment was insisted upon as the only foundation, and mathematical demonstration established as the criterion of scientific truth: but the moment

ment when it was determined to extend the use of these to enquiries, of which material substances could not be the objects, and to apply universally that kind of proof to moral and theological propositions, rejecting the proper and peculiar methods of their investigation; the natural philosopher, baffled in this attempt, easily became a sceptic in all points incapable of his favourite mode of demonstration; yet was often too much bigotted to his own system to admit a distinction between material and immaterial substances, or even to acknowledge in certain instances the existence of the latter. Scepticism, it must therefore be allowed, hath arisen very often from the misapplication of those very principles, which, in their proper subjects, were the best foundation of knowledge. As long, however, as moral and theological science depends upon fundamental propositions, no less evident to faith, than mathematical axioms to intellect, or physical facts to the senses, so long must its deductions be equally conclusive and equally satisfactory, to every unprejudiced mind, with geometrical proof

and experimental induction. Some will indeed be continually labouring to wrest both natural and revealed religion to an agreement with their own notions. They will estimate the pretensions of both by their own standard. They will confine their own assent, and restrain the assent of their disciples, to what they pronounce rational; and will reject whatever is above reason as disdainfully as what is contradictory to it. They will notwithstanding brand with the imputation of bigotry all, who, by distinguishing its province and defining its limits, would enable men to determine where its authority must end, and where faith begins to claim our assent and demand our obedience.

If men always improved in candour in proportion to their advancement in learning, or were less influenced by prejudice, as they enlarged the circle of their acquired knowledge, there would be little to complain of as to the mode of conducting the discussion of the most important theological questions; but the influence of bad passions

on polemics hath long been proverbial; and the practice of these times, when the vanity of earthly wisdom at least equals its increase, shews that such a hope is entirely groundless. The truth is, that all the artifices of the most unfair disputant have been resorted to on subjects, which deserve fair investigation in the highest degree, as they concern most materially the first interests of mankind. Advantages, which could be excusable only if men were to debate an indifferent question, merely to exercise or display their abilities, have been taken of such as have made liberal concessions. The candour of their conduct hath been misrepresented, as if it arose from consciousness of a weak cause; but the example of candour hath not been followed by their antagonists, even in matters of small moment, much less when essential points have become the objects of dispute, and when principles, on which the whole scheme of man's redemption depends, have been attacked in the most violent manner. It will not be reckoned, I trust, a hard expression, when misrepresentation of facts recorded

in ancient ecclesiastical history, derogation from the authority of great part of the New Testament, denial of the inspiration of the holy apostles, and even insinuations not to be repeated, concerning that Divine Person, on whom dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, are called violent. However they may be lightly esteemed by men who can with complacency hear the first principles of revealed religion called in question, and amuse themselves with the struggles of a controversy, without one thought how deeply their own first interests are concerned in its event, they must always seriously affect every one who beholds objects of his highest veneration degraded in a manner equally unfair and licentious.

And this is indeed the peculiar affliction of faithful believers in modern times. While men of acknowledged literary abilities decide (with a certain tone of authority, which is not very becoming in profane studies) against the most important tenets of the Christian faith, against the generally received nature and purposes of
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the most sacred rites established by Christ Himself, and against the venerable form of church-government derived from his apostles, and their immediate successors; when the objections of ancient times, which had lain dormant for ages, are revived with every art of modern refinement, every aid of improved science; and are brought forward in shapes most agreeable to reigning prejudices; when a spirit of perseverance, after repeated defeats, assumes, in the sight of many, the appearance of an honest and resolute conviction; when the illiterate are daily imposed upon by misrepresentation and confounded by sophistry; and the learned sceptic, already too prejudiced to examine into the ground of assertions in these points, is encouraged by his philosophic companions in his indifference to religion, or in that bigotry of infidelity which exists in some minds; there is little room to hope that doubts will not be infused into the minds of the upright, and perplexing apprehensions alarm even the most steadfast. And it must indeed be deeply afflicting, even to those whose faith remains unshaken, to

see revelation attacked in every part; and, although its evidence be strengthened on every examination, its influence on individuals too often weakened, to the danger of their eternal welfare. In this state of things, how various must be the learning, how profound the penetration, that must qualify the defenders of sound doctrine to be victorious in numberless contests! and with how much vigilance, perseverance, and firmness, must the attempts of their opponents be obviated or defeated!

But there is yet another virtue, to which modern contests afford much exercise, which is patience. If in the discussion of important questions a liberal and candid manner is adopted, not only the consciousness of a weak cause, as hath been already remarked, but indifference to a good one, and even insincerity, are imputed to the advocate of sound doctrine. If unruly and vain talkers are treated by him with that serious earnestness which a zeal for truth and the salvation of others naturally inspires; intolerance, with its kindred vices, are laid to his charge,

charge, with all the force of declamatory invective. A generous enemy would be ready to acknowledge some difficulty in a situation, wherein little honour is ascribed to patient firmness, little credit assigned to animated exertion. An unfair antagonist, or a treacherous ally, will increase that difficulty to the utmost, will refuse even the common allowances for human nature under such circumstances, and will conduct himself exactly as if latitude of principle relieved those who profess it from the common restrictions of humanity. Indeed every man of a really humble spirit will submit conscientiously to the personal injuries he may sustain from these opponents; and, if an evil of far greater importance did not arise from the same cause, perhaps that sort of injustice might be patiently endured from the adversaries of Christianity. But its effect extends far beyond the trial of the learned defenders of our faith. The lowest of the people, little qualified as they are by education to enter into the merits of many high questions that have been lately agitated, are carefully informed,

formed, in a style well adapted to their apprehension, of those delusions in which they are said to be following their forefathers. The natural vanity of man is not a little flattered, when what he used to behold with distant veneration, is professedly submitted to his free enquiry, degraded from its sublimity, cleared of all its difficulties, and made familiar by the manner in which it is expressed. His suspicion is excited, and his indignation raised against such as he is led to believe have veiled from his view what was really no mystery. The purposes of their conduct he sometimes imagines appear to him so plainly to be the depression and subjugation of the greater number by a combination of ecclesiastical and civil power, that, in his eagerness to recover the natural liberty of mankind, he is ready to pass over moral obligations, even such as are essential to the order of society. And here he is joined by the modern enthusiast. His experiences set him above instruction, and his election exonerates him from what he calls the duties of the law. Human learning, he is taught, is unnecessary

for him or for any of the faithful, as it was for the apostles, when they were first called: and, having no respect for the offices or the persons of those, who would bind him to certain duties by the controul of civil power, or the authority of sound doctrine, he cherishes in his mind an idea of that independence, which dignified the puritanical saints of the last century, and from which he finds the rational Christians of the present, though they cannot agree in any other points, by no means averse.

The humble and sincere, however moderate their talents, are undoubtedly most valuable members of the church. They are, indeed, peculiarly the *flock of Christ*, whom the elders are commanded *to feed*, not by constraint, but willingly; directing them, not by the influence of authority alone, but inducing them to submit themselves, of their own accord, to those *who watch for their souls, as they that must give an account*. They constitute, it is to be hoped, a large portion of

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Christian society; and the preservation of their attachment to the faithful word, is a work demanding every ability and disposition that are respectable and amiable in human nature: especially as the various forms of delusion multiply, and men think and teach whatever is right in their own eyes, without being at a loss where to find leaders, whose dictates, claim the veneration due alone to the perfect master's. To counteract all the extravagances of error, or to controul all the attempts of licentiousness, is an atchievement beyond the reach of any human ability. It is, however, absolutely necessary, that the ground, which the erroneous and the licentious endeavour to take, should be vigorously defended from their intrusion. That ground is the *faithful word delivered to the saints*, which whoever surrenders to the violence or artifices of any, abandons the interests of natural as well as of revealed religion; for to shake revelation in all its parts, to overthrow its authority with men, and to destroy their belief that God hath declared his will to mankind, or even

providentially superintends the government of the world, would be successive and necessary consequences of such unwarrantable freedoms as have lately been taken with holy scripture; if it were not the good pleasure of the Almighty continually to set over his church men, who, with a sober certainty of well-persuaded conviction, *bold fast the faithful word, as they have been taught, being able, both to exhort those who are under every affliction, and to convince the gainsayers.*

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